Remarks on Mercury by David Hunter of Virginia

Passed March 30th 1824
W. R. H.
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Perhaps there is not an individual medicine in the whole range of the Materia Medica, that is so extensively used, or so greatly abused, & answers so many important purposes, in its various combinations as Mercury. Among the numerous diseases, to which the human species is subject, there is scarcely an exception in which this medicine, in some one shape or other, has not been found serviceable; & many which before its introduction into practice, were ranked among the opprobria Medicorum, have since become quite tractable under its influence.

In the cure of several maladies peculiar to tropical climates, as well as some to which we ourselves are liable, it not only stands unrivaled, but is a sine qua non,

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notwithstanding the many abortive & futile attempts, that have been made to bring it into disrepute, by a few actuated doubtless by laudable motives, but by far the greater number through ignorance & prejudice, particularly as it regards its employment in syphilitic affections.

Mercury or quicksilver is a metal, existing naturally in a fluid form, but can by artificial means, be rendered solid, as it is usually seen, of a grey opake colour, resembling in appearence melted tin, or lead; but when perfectly pure, of a bright white; it is met with imbedded in the earth, sometimes, though rarely in virgin state, but generally combined with foreign substances,

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& perhaps oftener with sulphur, under the form of native Cinnabar, than any other. It is found in almost every part of the world, the principal mines however are those of Germany Spain, & Peru.

At what particular period mercury was first discovered, we have no certain knowledge. The physicians of ancient Greece & Rome, are said to have been acquainted with it, only as a poison too dangerous to meddle with. The credit of having first used it in the cure of disease is ascribed to the Arabians, a people who however degenerate at the present day, were probably more enlightened at that period, than any nation on earth. They employed it externally in the form of ointment in various

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cutaneous affections. Large doses were afterwards given in the crude state, but like most other metals when uncombined it acted only by its gravity, producing no deleterious consequences. In which practice succeeded the exhibition of certain pharmaceutical preparations, more prompt in their operation, & more effectual in checking disease. It was not however until some time after its introduction into Europe, which is dated about the latter end of the 13th century, esteemed a safe medicine, & regularly admitted into the Materia Medica. In the following century its control over the venereal virus was discovered which is probably the most important discovery, the annals of Medical science afford.

The reputation of the medicine, since its first introduction into use, on a few years has been extremely fluctuating. Its curative qualities are so highly estimated at the present day, when judiciously treated, as to deserve the appellation by which it was designated, by one of its earliest advocates, of, Mirabilis et egregia medicina.

The most usual effects of mercury when introduced into the human system, are, an increased action of the heart & arteries, together with an increase of the secretions & excretions in general. Its action is sometimes directed to one part, sometimes to another, & often to every part, depending in a great measure upon the quantity & quality exhibited.

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The sensible effects are farther more conspicuously exerted upon the salivary glands of the mouth, than upon any other parts, producing ptyalism or salivation. This symptom is characterised in first, a metallic taste in the mouth & tenderness of the gums which assume a whitish & spongy appearance, a very fœtid odour of the breath, an increased secretion of saliva & very frequently small ulcers in various parts of the mouth together with some degree of irritability throughout the whole body: the system is then said to be mercurialized. Such are the most usual effects of Mercury, when carelessly introduced & left off in due season, which commonly disappear in a few weeks, without leaving behind

any permanent derangement of the constitution. If however it be pushed to a greater extent, by continuing after the above has taken place, or if it be administered in too large or repeated doses, a train of very alarming & distressing symptoms will occur; the tongue, gums, lips, cheeks, &c, swell to a frightful degree, extensive ulcerations form in every part of the mouth. the gums bleed profusely, the teeth become loose, black, & occasionally fall out, the jaws mortify, slough off, with debility & emaciation of every part, which continue until death closes the scene. & in other cases where the pernicious effects of the medicine, have not been carried quite so far, it not

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unfrequently incapacitates the subject of it, from enjoying any degree of comfort during life. I know a young lady whose mouth from inordinate doses of Calomel taken in a bilious fever, was so much twisted to one side, as entirely to change her features: & who at the present day (which is twelve or eighteen months since the attack) is under the necessity of separating her jaws by means of wedges, some time previous to taking her meals; & also another young lady, whose tongue from the same cause, adheres so closely to the adjacent parts altering her voice to such a degree, that she can be but indistinctly understood, by her

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most intimate acquaintances. In both of the above cases, large & frequent doses of calomel had been administered, & the common symptom in the section of cancer wherein we are, under such circumstances of tenderness & swelling of the gums, was present. An effect from even doses of calomel, which is as far as I am acquainted but slightly mentioned by authors on the subject, it is succeeded by redness & hemorrhage of the gums, in violent cases 12 or 16 ounces of blood are discharged in the twenty four hours, attended with a comparative small secretion of saliva, but intolerable fetor of the breath; the pulse in the mean time is rapid & intermittent indicating great derangement of the whole system. There is also

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another effect which often accompanies the above, & which I have never seen mentioned as induced by mercury, namely a species of Petechiæ, or small black circumscribed spots, answering none of the eruptions described by Alley, Sprens, Pearson &c; appearing most generally on the superior parts of the body, but occasionally on every part; The same is mentioned by Wilson Philip in his work on fever as occurring in the plague, as well as several other diseases of debility. He observes that it is this particular eruption, which by some has been called tokens, or God's token, & that they are regarded as a very fatal symptom; those which I have seen have been unmarketable tokens of death, as I never knew an instance of recovery

after their appearance, it may be as well to mention, that the common bilious fever of Berkeley County is the disease, in which I have noticed them; & that they are produced by mercury is evident from the fact, that they only occurred where a great deal of that mineral had been given, & an uncommon uneasiness arising from mercury is a disagreeable common complaint, sometimes accompanied with discharges of blood, whether the medicine be given, either externally or internally. In case of syphilis under such circumstances is very troublesome. There are indeed nearly as many diseases either real or imaginary enumerated as arising from the action of this medicine, as those in which it is employed. To

cure; among which may be reckoned dropsies, hemorrhages, paralysis, nearly all the terminations of the first stage of inflammation: such as the thickening & adhesions of various membranes, most of the symptoms of indigestion, incurable mania, a kind of hectic fever, pains similar to those of rheumatism, notes of a scrofulous nature, & particularly a peculiar eruption, which has attracted considerable attention in Europe of late years; differently styled by the different authors who have treated on the subject. a disease which very seldom occurs in this country from the above cause.

Mercury as before stated, is the most of our valuable remedies when pushed beyond a certain

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extent, frequently becomes highly poisonous; but that it can be managed when judiciously directed so as to exert a more powerful influence, & that influence too of the most salutary kind, than any other article we possess, is I believe generally admitted.

The treatment for the morbid effects, arising from a mercurial course, in which the medicine has been too freely used, or too long persevered in, may be divided into two heads; first when the system has been surcharged, second, that state of the constitution immediately succeeding the mercurial excitement. In the former we, unfortunately have no corrective, that can

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al air in other cases, The different preparations of sulphur & particularly sulphurous water, have been recommended; The preparations of lead have of late been proposed, when the morbid effects of the Cattlem article being more quickly relieved by mercury, than any thing else. The patient however should be kept on a low diet his bowels should be kept open with sulphur & cremortartar, or some other laxative, and opium be given with a view of relieving pain, & that peculiar irritability attending the complaint, he should also be exposed to pure air & take moderate exercise. Many gargles have been proposed, when the mouth is much

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affected, keeping that part clean with cool water is, I believe as good as any of them. As for the same stage, it is to be managed under adverse circumstances, like most other states of debility; & as the stomach particularly suffers, such medicines should be selected as will increase the tone of that organ, & improve the appetite; which is generally very much impaired. To answer which, many of the vegetable tonics, the various preparations of iron, & the mineral acids have been advised. I have seen in several cases, where the system having been very violently excited, was laboured by a lurked state of the bowels, connected with a similar condition of the liver.

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which last organ had to all appearances ceased secreting bile; under such circumstances, the golden sulphuret of antimony was productive of the very best effects, moderately exciting the tissues, & at the same time promoting gentle secretion.

Concerning the many learned dissertations on the modus operandi of mercury, the subject is still very obscure; that it is absorbed into the circulation is beyond doubt, from various conditions in the system arising from its exhibition; such as the appearance of the fetor ~~the urine~~ breath, from a mercurialized patient, the detection of it in several parts of the body, the excretion of it

[illegible] the slow, [illegible] from the mercurial impression [illegible] communicated from the mother to the sucking infant. Its local action is evinced from its purgative & emetic qualities, as well as many other. Its action on the nervous system is equally evident. I believe it to be the most permanent stimulus we possess, & I would ask whether or not the high reputation it has acquired in the management of those violent & rapid affections peculiar to tropical climates, may be, in a great measure owing to this quality.

To enumerate the diseases in which mercury has been employed would be to repeat the whole

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nosology from beginning to end. Its influence in subduing the syphilitic venus has held undisputed sway, for a long time; & every attempt to cure that disease at the present day, without mercury, is looked upon by the most enlightened physicians as jeopardising the life of the patient. It is equally indispensable in the diseases of that important viscus the liver, as also are the abdominal viscera.

Cases of tubercular consumption are recorded to have been cured by mercury, but the presumption is, that the lungs in such cases were only sympathetically affected, from a morbid state of the stomach, liver, spleen &c, or

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that they were cases of chronic bronchitis; as it is very questionable whether genuine tubercular consumption was ever cured by any means.

Mercury for a long time was confined nearly exclusively to chronic complaints, but of late years its reputation in the management of acute affections has advanced at a very rapid pace, & in fact has superseded all other plans of treatment in several of the latter.

Dr Hamilton of Edenburgh has laid down a set of rules, to be observed while undergoing a mercurial course; which are important, & should be attended to; when the circumstances and

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idea of it and it was frequent
in so happens, particularly in
the country, that we find it
impracticable to subject him
strictly regarding the remedy, to
such restrictions, it is, I be-
lieve in such cases that and
little inconvenience generally
attends the disregarding of many
of his rules. There are however
several of them, which should
never be omitted, viz, if the pa-
tient be robust & plethoric, he
should lose a considerable quan-
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lose diet, & abstain from all kinds of stimulating food & drink. The medicine should be gradually introduced, & discontinued as soon as the mouth is materially affected, & afterwards resumed if necessary, rather than, render the constitution liable to be impaired by a surcharge.

Bearing in exhibition of the [illegible] of tardy lie above the natural standard at any time, deficiency should be resorted to, or on the other hand debility, fever, opium, wine, the peruvian bark &c, are to be used. The system occasionally offers a resistance to the operation of mercury, when neither of the above are in a great degree present,

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under such circumstances, the warm bath, & particularly nauseating doses of antimony are advised. I may here remark that my preceptor, Dr Harrison of Martinsburg, Virginia, has been ~~been~~, for a number of years, in the habit, & with very great advantage, of combining the pulvis antimonialis with calomel in active doses, in the treatment of almost every disease, which required the use of this latter article; es= =pecially in bilious & intermit= =tent fevers, croup, cholera in= =fantum, worms, & dysentery.

Mercury as before mentioned in its metallic state is inert, it has however heretofore been

a zinc acid solution, in alternate consolations with a vein to gaining a passage by its gravity; the practice, I believe is but little pursued at the present day, therefore a great variety of chemical preparations have been devised; among which the following are the most important, the two black oxydes, the protochloride, the perchloride, the nitric oxyde, the phosphat, & the red sulphuret.

The blue pill, in which the metal is partially combined with oxygen, is one of its mildest preparations; & where a gentle mercurial impression is desired is generally preferable to any other; it will however

prevail on the bowels to give
in sufficient quantity.
The sentiment in which the me-
tal is also oxydized to a cer-
tain degree, is a highly valu-
able form for using the medi-
cine, especially when it is de-
sirable to impregnate the system
in a very short time, or when
some peculiarity of the primæ vi-
æ forbids its employment in the
usual manner, as the skin ac-
cording to Mr Hunter is much
less sensitive to lithe than the
stomach. & is also capable of
bearing much stronger impres-
sions. It is also used with the
most decided benefit, in many
affections of the skin.
Calomel admits of a more extensive

irritation, it is, however, more
injurious in the presence of hyper-
secretion, and is often, perhaps,
taken just together with an
antiseptic, an astringent or a
vegetable. Increases the secretion
and, concealing the secretion,
equalizing the circulation,
when such effects are required.
The corrosive sublimate & red
precipitate are of most importance
to the surgeon for topical apl.
irritations. The former is however
much recommended by some
authors in both stages of syphilis
either alone, or combined with
sarsaparilla & guaiacum. The
latter (red precipitate) I have
seen agree with the stomach
& bowels, when neither calomel

or the blue pill would.

The phosphat is a very powerful preparation, & not unlikely when better acquainted with, will supersede many of its other combinations in the treatment of several diseases.

The Cinnabar is at present never employed as an internal medicine, being only used in mercurial fumigations which [illegible] a[illegible] when the mouth, nose, throat &c are [illegible] with venereal ulcers or when the common modes for mercurializing the system have been unsuccessfully tried.

Notwithstanding all that has been said & written on the effects of mercury in either alleviating

or aggravating the sufferings of the human family; I think it would be a difficult question to decide, whether it really has been productive of most good or evil. Thousands have doubtless been rescued from the jaws of death, by its salutary agency; & thousands been hurried to an untimely grave, by its mis=application. But the fact of a medicine being abused, through ignorance, can be no valid objection to its employment, when in the hands of cautious and judicious men. —